



Energy and Civilization: A History (MIT Press)

By Vaclav Smil

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Energy is the only universal currency; it is necessary for getting anything done. The conversion of energy on Earth ranges from terra-forming forces of plate tectonics to cumulative erosive effects of raindrops. Life on Earth depends on the photosynthetic conversion of solar energy into plant biomass. Humans have come to rely on many more energy flows -- ranging from fossil fuels to photovoltaic generation of electricity -- for their civilized existence. In this monumental history, Vaclav Smil provides a comprehensive account of how energy has shaped society, from pre-agricultural foraging societies through today's fossil fuel--driven civilization. Humans are the only species that can systematically harness energies outside their bodies, using the power of their intellect and an enormous variety of artifacts -- from the simplest tools to internal combustion engines and nuclear reactors. The epochal transition to fossil fuels affected everything: agriculture, industry, transportation, weapons, communication, economics, urbanization, quality of life, politics, and the environment. Smil describes humanity's energy eras in panoramic and interdisciplinary fashion, offering readers a magisterial overview. This book is an extensively updated and expanded version of Smil's *Energy in World History* (1994). Smil has incorporated an enormous amount of new material, reflecting the dramatic developments in energy studies over the last two decades and his own research over that time.

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Editorial Review

Review

Everything we humans have ever done has depended on our ability to obtain energy, and Vaclav Smil is the world's leading historian of this process. *Energy and Civilization* is sure to be the early twenty-first century's most important guide to this all-important subject.

(Ian Morris, Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics, Stanford University; author of *Why the West Rules -- For Now*)

Smil's masterful overview explains energy's centrality in creating and sustaining civilization. Grounded in science, sensitive to cultural differences, and richly detailed, it is the definitive work on this vital subject.

(David E. Nye, author of *Electrifying America* and *When the Lights Went Out*)

About the Author

Vaclav Smil is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Manitoba. He is the author of forty books, including *Power Density: A Key to Understanding Energy Sources and Uses* and *Made in the USA: The Rise and Retreat of American Manufacturing*, both published by the MIT Press. In 2010 he was named by *Foreign Policy* as one of the Top 100 Global Thinkers. In 2013 Bill Gates wrote on his website that "there is no author whose books I look forward to more than Vaclav Smil."

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Mark Bottoms:

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